

**Series: The Words of Jesus—Intimate Conversations**  
**Today: The Calling of Phillip and Nathanael**

A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Today we return to our series on the Words of Jesus. During these summer months we will be dealing with the words which Jesus spoke in one-on-one conversations with those who sought to follow him.

This morning the conversation is between Jesus and Nathanael. It is in a section of the Gospel of John where Jesus is calling his twelve disciples. The conversation comes shortly after the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. John has named Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. Andrew was a follower of John the Baptist, and he had heard John say of Jesus that he was the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), and his response was immediate. He went and told his brother, Simon, and he invites him to come and meet Jesus. Andrew and Simon become the first two to follow Jesus.

Jesus then heads north to Galilee where he will perform his first public miracle in Cana of Galilee when he changed water into wine at a wedding. It was in Cana that he met Phillip; the third disciple who receives the call to follow him. Like Andrew, Phillip cannot be quiet about who he has met. He invites his friend, Nathanael, to come and see for himself.

Nathanael is not named in the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) as one of the twelve disciples. That honor goes to a man named Bartholomew. Scholars have wondered about the omission, but one has suggested that perhaps Bartholomew was Nathanael’s last name. In Hebrew, men were identified by their family heritage. I would have been Randolph bar Harold or Randolph, son of Harold. So we wonder if Nathanael and Bartholomew are the same

man. Perhaps he was the son of Tholmai: Nathanael bar Tholmai, and the writer of the other Gospels called him Bar Tholmai--Bartholomew.

The encounter Nathanael had with Jesus is instructive in two ways for us: 1) How he met Jesus; and 2) What Jesus Told Him.

### **HOW NATHANAEL MET JESUS**

It is instructive for us to explore how Nathanael met Jesus. It was the same way Simon Peter met him. Someone invited him to “come and see.” To this day such an invitation is still the most effective form of evangelism.

Early in my journey as a Christian of college age I learned of the Indian missionary, D.T. Niles. Niles is famous for his statement that sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with another person is like one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.

Years later I have studied all different kinds of evangelism programs, and the conclusion in all of them is that the best way to get people to come to church is by simply inviting people to “come and see” what is important to us. There is no technique that works any better in the area of church growth than each one bringing one; each one of us extending the invitation to family, friends, neighbors and strangers to come and see for themselves if the claim that God loves us personally and unconditionally in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ which we commemorate this morning at this table.

Recently I was meeting with a couple preparing them for their wedding. It is always a privilege to become acquainted with people around this important event in their lives. As part of our meeting we talked about the common areas of marital conflict, and I inquired about their faith background. The man had been raised a Christian, but the woman had no religious training whatsoever. She came from a broken home, and her single mother simply did not feel she had

the time to help her children develop faith. It had not been important in the mom's family, and it was therefore not important in her own understanding of raising a child.

I asked the woman why she wanted to be married in a church, and she nodded to her fiancé. It was apparently important to him, but not to her. When asked how they would resolve that difference, they had not thought about it.

I had heard this woman speak of her love for her children, the values by which she conducted her life, and the things that were important to her in a relationship. I perceived her to be a very spiritual person, but she had no language for her spirituality. So I spoke to her of what Christians believe and how that helps strengthen a marriage when faith is actively practiced in the home. She listened intently, and when I was through, she said, *"I think I would like that."* So I invited her to come and see, and she turned to her fiancé who said, *"I would like that, too."*

Now I have no idea whether they will ever come, but I have hopes to see them in this church some day in the not so distant future. All I was responsible for was the invitation. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit.

Lee Eclov is a colleague who tells of his experience of visiting with people every morning at a place called Einstein's Bagels. He comments that those visits help him understand the challenges that people have in sharing their faith. It dawned on him that the biggest hindrance for a lot of us in sharing Christ is not that we don't know how, but that we don't see a natural and gracious opportunity. He said that he rarely had a natural chance to speak of the gospel. So he began to change how he prayed. Now he teaches people to pray for open doors to show and share the love of Christ. He also realized that evangelism is a lot slower process than he used to think—that it often happens in baby steps, and gently.

For example, every now and then he'd see a fellow named Jim. Jim is a dentist, and Eclov learned that he has a son who is an evangelical missionary. Jim was a sweet and generous guy, and Eclov enjoyed talking with him. He tried inviting him to church several times, but nothing happened. Then one morning while they were filling their cups, Jim told him that he had made a New Year's promise to his son to go to church. "I'm preaching this Sunday about the Good Shepherd and lost sheep," Eclov told him casually.

Jim froze, coffee cup half-filled, and just looked at me. "Are you kidding?" he asked. When Eclov reminded him that he had extended the invitation on several other occasions, Jim said "I'll be there." And he was. And he still is. (Source: *Lee Eclov, "Christ in a Coffee Shop," Trinity Magazine (Spring 2006), p. 16-17*)

Nathanael met Jesus because Phillip asked him to come and see. It is still the most effective form of evangelism we have. It is as simple as that.

### **WHAT JESUS TOLD HIM**

It is also instructive for us to note what Jesus said to Nathanael when he met him. When Jesus met Nathanael, he told him who he was: a man in whom there was no deceit. Nathanael's name means "*gift of God.*" Jesus perceived that he was already a man of faith. He had observed him sitting under a fig tree. Any Jew would have known that the fig tree was a sign of peace, and anyone who sat under a fig tree was someone who was likely meditating on the peace which God promised when the Messiah would come. Nathanael was already spiritually attuned to the ministry of Jesus. All Jesus did was to tell him who he was, and Nathanael immediately responded to his ministry: "*You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.*"

Friends, I believe with all my heart that there are people like Nathanael who want to believe what it is we preach here every Sunday. There are people who want to believe that God

loves them and showed his love for them in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. What turns them off is the feeling they get from Christians that they somehow don't measure up. It is the insistence of too many Christians that unless they say the right words, or dress the right way, or look like the majority of us here today that they don't belong. We try to force-feed them a Gospel they already understand without trying to understand them first and then interpret the Gospel in a language they can understand.

I was rereading a book on evangelism called *Seismic Shifts* by Kevin Harney the other day. He tells the story of a woman who every day, at exactly the same time, would go to the bathroom cabinet, open it, and take out a huge bottle of castor oil. Then she would head to the kitchen to get a tablespoon. At the sound of the drawer opening and the silverware rattling, Patches, her Yorkshire terrier, would run and hide—sometimes under the bed, at other times in the bathtub or behind her recliner. Patches knew what was coming.

Someone had convinced this woman that her beloved dog would have strong teeth, a beautiful coat, and a long life if she gave him a spoonful of castor oil every day. So, as an act of love every 24 hours, she cornered Patches, pinned him down, pried open his mouth, and—as he whimpered, squirmed, and fought her with all his strength—poured a tablespoon of castor oil down his little doggie throat.

Then one day, in the middle of their battle royal, with one sideways kick, Patches sent the dreaded bottle of castor oil flying across the kitchen floor. The woman ran to the pantry and grabbed a towel to clean up the mess.

When she got back, she was utterly shocked. There was Patches licking up the spilled castor oil with a look of satisfaction only a dog can make. The woman began to laugh uncontrollably. In one moment, it all made sense. Patches liked castor oil. He just hated being

pinned down and having it poured down his throat. (Source: *Kevin G. Harney, Seismic Shifts (Zondervan, 2005), p. 23-24*)

### **CONCLUSION AND INVITATION**

Like most of the intimate conversations we will explore this summer, there is much we can learn from this one between Jesus and Nathanael. There are people whom we know who are ready to respond to the good news of God's love for us. Like Simon Peter and Nathanael, all they are waiting for is an invitation. Unless you and I offer that invitation, they may never come to know the depth and breadth of God's love. They may never experience what we will share here this morning: the body of Christ broken for us, and the blood of Christ shed for us. We are the ones who must share the Gospel by knowing who they are and speaking to them in a language they can understand.